

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 4

Issue 1 October 1997

Article 41

3-1-2011

The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America

Charles Orser Jr.

Vanderbilt University, charles.e.orser@vanderbilt.edu

Diane E. Wallman

University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

Recommended Citation

Orser, Charles Jr. and Wallman, Diane E. (2011) "The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 41.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol4/iss1/41>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Book Review



Charles Orser Jr. *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America*. Tallahassee, University Press of Florida, 2007, 232 pp., \$25.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-813-03143-9.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archeology Newsletter by Diane E. Wallman, University of South Carolina

Charles Orser has remained at the forefront of discussions of race in historical archaeology, and continues on this path in his latest book *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America*. In this publication, Orser aims to bring the topic of race, and more specifically the process of racialization, to the center of the historical archaeology agenda in America. He argues for a specific framework guiding how archaeologists approach race, suggesting that we look at racialization as a structural process that has explicit connections to relations of power and control. Archaeologists must not only address this process in the past, but also engage with this structure as it continues to shape our experiences.

Historical archaeologists, in Orser's view, should explicitly engage in identifying and revealing how the process of racialization is materialized. In order to take on this role, it is necessary that we approach racialization through a structural framework, as opposed to a cognitive perspective. From this standpoint, racialization and racism "create action and encourage practice within a carefully constructed system of power relations" (p. 13). In order to "confront and engage" this process, he advocates for archaeologists to investigate the possible connections between capitalism, material consumption and racialization.

According to Orser, anthropology and race have a long interconnected history, but archaeologists lagged behind other social scientists in explicitly addressing racialization within their research. Recent research in historical archaeology, however, has focused on race and identity, the spatiality of race, and the development of race relations. Orser argues that those studies that have investigated race have largely focused on the history of African Americans, paying little attention to the construction of whiteness in America, and to racialization as it occurred beyond the Eastern Coast of the United States.

Additionally, he endorses community involvement and reflexivity in order to deconstruct the race structure that persists today.

Throughout the first three chapters, Orser develops an explicit multi-scalar framework through which archaeologists can develop a more thorough and sophisticated understanding of the structure of racialized relations within America and how this structure was negotiated locally. In order to address race as an aspect of "epochal structure," according to Orser, it is necessary to deconstruct how racism was historically constructed within the American social system. Orser argues that racialization in America is directly connected to the "hierarchical structure of capitalist society" (p. 51). Epochal structures, in Orser's view, include "societal structures of inequality" (p.53) which are constructed of network relations, and these relations are enacted or performed in particular spaces and places. It is up to archaeologists, then, to investigate how places and materials reveal relations within the epochal structure.

Orser bases this 'model' on Bourdieu's conceptions of habitus, capital and fields. He sees the racial category as a kind of "embodied cultural capital," (p. 60) in that race becomes naturalized through becoming a part of one's habitus. In order to examine the process of racialization in the material record, archaeologists need to view consumption as occurring within a network of social relations. People will manipulate networks of relations through consumption within the structural constraints of their habitus. Our ultimate goal as historical archaeologists is to "discover ways to observe racialized differences in material culture generated during capitalism" (p. 69).

To demonstrate his approach to historic racialization in America, Orser presents two case studies. The first is an exploration of the Irish in New York, and the second focuses on the Chinese in California. Through these examples, he argues that racialization was not simply constructed on phenotype, but as exemplified by the categorization of the Irish as 'non-white,' incorporated factors such as educational rank and occupation.

Orser first focuses on the Irish in New York City, providing historical, documentary and archaeological evidence to investigate racialization in this context. In order to contextualize the archaeological study of an Irish Tenement in New York's Five Points neighborhood, Orser presents the historical evidence revealing the habitus of the immigrants from Ireland and also the epochal structures in place within the U.S. during the mid-late 19th Century. These epochal structures, according to Orser, were both social and politico-legal, involving the actions of social networks in developing anti-Immigrant sentiment and also the construction of laws and statutes to constrict the immigrants. The

racialization of the Irish, according to Orser, began in Ireland, but was 'perfected' through the nativist movements in the United States. Using pictorial images and 19th century 'scientific' inquiry, Orser demonstrates how anti-Irish racialization was a part of habitus formation for non-Irish Americans. The racialization of the Irish in New York was most clearly materialized through the spatial segregation of the community within the city. Orser suggests that archaeological evidence, medicinal bottles in this context, should reveal this spatial segregation and the epochal racial structure that existed in America.

In chapter five, Orser uses both historical records and archaeology to present a case study in which he focuses on the process of racialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in California. Orser analyzes the materials recovered from the excavation of a Chinese laundry in Stockton, California to address how the national pursuit of the racialization of the Chinese in the United States is revealed through the material record. The bulk of this case study addresses the larger issue of Chinese racialization in America, which took place mostly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries throughout the United States. Orser (p. 139) presents a variety of sources to show the "racialist habitus of the United States" during Chinese socialization, including pamphlets and books, United States Federal Acts and Treaties, and political cartoons. Orser then provides an overview of the negative treatment of Chinese laundries and launders in America, and reviews the findings of previous ethnographic/historic studies, including that of a Chinese community in Oakland, and one of the Chinese in Chicago. Finally, Orser provides a brief analysis of the material record from the Stockton site.

Within these case studies, Orser argues that racialization is a process in which individuals who are "collectively classified as white maintained control and authority over people perceived as nonwhite," but that it is also highly situational and negotiated on a local-scale. His detailed discussion of the history of these two groups, as well as his attention to institutionalized and structural racism as it developed in the United States is a unique contribution to the discipline, revealing the insight that historical archaeology can give towards understanding the nuances the immigrant experience.

Overall, this book provides a very useful vocabulary and framework through which historical archaeologists can discuss and investigate issues of race and racialization. This publication provides a 'call to action' for historical archaeologists to develop a more sophisticated and explicit discussion of race. While many of the ideas presented in this book are not novel concepts, as illustrated by Orser's own review of the historical archaeology of race and racialization, this discussion brings to light the surprising deficiency in attention

to this topic in much of historical archaeology that persists even today. In particular, within the archaeology of the African Diaspora, it seems that the process of racialization is often a contextual observation rather than an explicit focus of investigation.

As Orser and others have pointed out, the racialized structure of the colonial and industrial world was developed as the institution of slavery progressed. Forming social relations around skin color and other phenotypic traits was a shift often associated with the rise of capitalist endeavors in the New World and associated economic benefits of slavery in the colonies. Institutionalized and structural racism was a situational and fluctuating process that developed over time to allow for the development and maintenance of power and control by the 'dominant' group. As archaeologists we are in a unique position to examine process of racialization associated with Africans and African Americans in the New World, through the material record, as it developed over time and across space. As much of our research takes place within local, small-scale contexts, we are also able to focus on the more particular expressions of this structure, as individuals and groups negotiated and resisted the epochal structures in place in historic America. Orser has provided a highly useful framework through which archaeologists of the African Diaspora can begin to more comprehensively address race as a central concern of our research, as it is materialized in the archaeological record.